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# Water meter system is an issue at hearing on rate increase

MARK GILLISPIE  
Plain Dealer Reporter

The Cleveland City Council wants to know what effect the city Water Department's \$91 million automated meter reading system is having on a proposed rate increase.

Mayor Frank Jackson's administration could not provide an answer Wednesday during the council's first hearing on the proposed rate increase.

The hearing drew no protests and few pointed questions. Many suburban mayors, who have criticized the proposed rate increases,

were attending Cuyahoga County Executive Ed FitzGerald's "state of the county" address on Wednesday.

Councilman Michael Polensek, a persistent critic of the Water Department and the Jackson administration, said he doesn't think the council was given an accurate picture of the department's finances last year when officials sought the council's permission to buy the meter reading system.

"We're supposed to provide oversight, and the only way we can provide oversight is to have information," Polensek said.

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Councilman Kevin Kelley, chairman of the Public Utilities Committee, said the answer to the question about the meter-reading system, along with a complete copy of the department's rate study, will be posted on the council's website.

"People are mumbling about it," Kelley said after the hearing. "Let's answer the question conclusively and let's move on with it."

Kelley added that he didn't think the cost of the meter-reading system would affect rates

much. The administration has said it needs to raise rates because of plummeting consumption at a time when the department's costs continue to rise.

Jackson's administration has proposed raising rates 82 percent for a typical Cleveland residential customer and around 50 percent for suburban customers over the next 4½ years.

The Water Department, which directly bills about 414,000 accounts in 70 Northeast Ohio communities, has traditionally received a rate increase nearly every year since the early 1990s. The city's consultants say the department will be insolvent by 2015 if it does not raise rates.

But this rate request comes as the Water Department has been criticized for its billing problems

and poor customer service. Kelley said he will talk with Jackson administration officials about holding public meetings to discuss the rate increase.

"The more information the public has, the better it is for the entire process," Kelley said after Wednesday's hearing.

Water Department officials will make an April 28 presentation to the Northeast Ohio Mayors and Managers Association.

The next City Council hearing on the rate increase is scheduled for Wednesday, April 20. Kelley said he planned to hold at least two or three more hearings.

The administration wants the rate increase to take effect July 1.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:  
mgillispie@plained.com, 216-999-4738